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THE CARE OF THE DEAD

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EYRE AND SPOTTISWOODE, LTD.

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I.

In a graveyard west of Vimy there are buried 1,320 French soldiers and more than 600 English. The earth is bare on most of the English graves; the French ones are older, but all are cared for alike by the Englishman now in charge of the place. "We leave you our trenches and our dead," a French officer said to an English one when our army took over this part of the line, and both parts of the trust are discharged with a will.

What this means for the French, one feels when one sees the visits of French soldiers' friends to their graves. The other day a French woman in deep mourning came here with a handful of white flowers to place upon one of these. Probably it was her son's, for she was not young. While she was arranging them at its head, there came into the cemetery one of the usual little bareheaded processions—a N.C.O. showing the way; then an English chaplain with his open book;

then, on a stretcher, the body sewn up in a brown army blanket, a big Union Jack lying over it; then half a dozen privates looking as Englishmen do at these moments —a little awkward, but simply and sincerely sorry. As they passed the French woman she rose and then, evidently moved by some impulse which shyness made it difficult to follow, fell in at the rear of the procession, with some of the flowers still in her hand. When I next saw them, the men were standing round the new grave, the chaplain was reading aloud, "dust to dust" and "ashes to ashes," and the woman, a few yards away, was kneeling on the ground. The service over, and the rest turning away, she came close to the grave, dropped the white flowers in, and went back to the other grave empty handed.

One knew, though the woman could not, how all this would be told to the dead Englishman's comrades; and one felt the truth of Sir Douglas Haig's saying, that a kind of work which "does not directly contribute to the successful termination of the

war " may still " have an extraordinary moral value to the troops in the field, as well as to the relatives and friends of the dead at home." But for the work of the Army's Graves Registration Units, this little scene and many other scenes equally binding, in their degree, to the friendship of England and France could scarcely have taken place. After the French Army had left this district, the French soldier's grave might not have been taken care of, perhaps could not have been even known to be his ; the Englishman might have been buried under cover of night in some vacant space near the firing-trench, and all trace of the grave blown away next day by a shell. To know the full worth of what these units are doing now, one needs to see first what the state of things was in the first months of the war.

In those days a man was commonly buried close to the place where he fell. Wherever hard fighting had been, in France or Belgium, the eye of the traveller along the roads is struck by many low crosses

sticking out of the ground—in the fields, in cottage gardens, in corners of farmyards and orchards, even on roadside strips of grass. Where the ground has changed hands a good deal in the course of the war, you may see, within a few hundred yards of each other, the gabled and eaved cross of the Germans, with "Hier ruht in Gott" and a name painted white on a dark ground, the beaded wire wreath of the French, with its "Requiescat" or "Mort pour la France," and the plain-lined cross of the English, white or light brown or just the unpainted wood, "In loving memory" of one or more officers or men. Even now a good many of these isolated memorials are raised. The very position of some of them is eloquent. Near Fricourt, on what used to be No Man's Land till we won it this summer, a number of crosses, all of the English sort and inscribed in English, stand to the honoured memory of "an unknown French soldier," "two unknown French soldiers," "six unknown French soldiers, here buried." Here, when

our troops took the German front line on the 1st July, it was one of their first cares to bury the French comrades who fell while holding this part of the front during the winter, whose bodies could not be retrieved at the time of their death, from under the fire of German machine-guns, and, when recovered at last, were beyond all chance of identification. Near La Boisselle, again, is a cross inexpertly made of two pieces of lath, and lettered in pencil: "In loving memory of 2nd Lieut. X., —— Regiment, killed here, July 1st, 1916." It stands scarcely ten feet in front of the line from which our army advanced on that morning. You feel, when you see it, the thrill of the first moment of the long battle of the Somme—the subaltern giving the word to his men, and himself springing first out of the trench, and falling almost at once, and the men pressing on.

That is a special case of a grave on a site more monumental than Westminster Abbey itself. A few such graves, and some part of the trenches near them, will probably

be preserved for ever by village communes or private owners of land, as memorials and relics of the great war. But not every man can be buried just where he falls. As a rule, the spot remains under fire for some time after his death. Even if it could be done, and the history of the war be left written in this way on the face of the country, —a long dotted line of graves representing a trench, a cluster of graves a skirmish, a dense constellation a battle—the record would not be durable. France could not fence off a strip of country 300 miles long and many miles wide, and keep it up as a historical museum. And nothing else could preserve all the graves, or most of them. Some would be treasured and tended, as they are now, by farmers and cottagers. Others would soon be lost sight of. In a few months the earth of a newly made grave sinks in, the cross falls awry, and may split, the writing on it is weathered away. Unless something is done, and done promptly, every trace of an outlying grave may be gone in a year. That is

what might have happened to thousands of British and French soldiers' graves if an Englishman, full of goodwill and energy, had not noticed the danger in time, and stepped in, with a few like-minded friends, to avert it.

How the work was begun, and how it has grown, may next be described.

II.

In the autumn of 1914, the necessity for a continued organization to undertake the supervision of graves was recognised, both from the point of view of national feeling, and to discourage the disconnected and spasmodic efforts of private individuals, which were threatening to create friction and confusion. The services of Mr. Fabian Waro, who, while employed under the British Red Cross with French troops, had already interested himself in the subject, were obtained by the Army, and, later, this gentleman was granted a commission in order to supervise the department of which he is now Director.

It was not until March, 1915, that the organization of the Commission of Graves Registration and Enquiries finally assumed its present shape.

Under the Directorate are the Graves Registration Units in the different spheres of military activity. In France and Belgium there are four of these units, each with their two or three sections. Three of the four units divide the British front between them, from north of Ypres to the Somme battlefield. The fourth unit deals with everything outside and behind the beats of these three. When an officer or man is killed at the front, or dies of wounds, his burial is at once reported to the Director as well as to the base. If killed in action, he may still be buried, in the old way, somewhere near the trench. If so, the chaplain or officer who buries him reports the position of the grave, and one of the officers of the Graves Registration Units visits it, verifies the record, affixes, if necessary, a durable cross, with the date, the man's name, rank, regiment and regi-

mental number upon it, clearly stamped on aluminium tape, and enters these particulars and the exact site of the grave in the register. But this mode of burial is becoming much less common. The Army has been quick to realise the desirability of burying its dead in the nearest of the 300 or more recognised cemeteries behind the line. The bodies are carried back by road or light railway to one of the little wooden, iron, or canvas mortuaries which the Graves Registration Units have set up in the cemeteries. There the soldiers in charge of the cemetery do all that remains to be done, and an eye-witness can assure the friends of soldiers at home that there is nothing perfunctory about these funerals. Everything is done as tenderly and reverently as if the dead man were in an English churchyard among themselves.

When a death takes place in a hospital, there is, of course, a regular cemetery at hand, and registration is simple.

Some of the cemeteries are great extensions of little village graveyards. Some were

begun by special corps or divisions, which wished to bury their dead all together. In one you find a separate plot, each with its special entrance, for Gurkhas, Sikhs and Punjabis. Under the great trees of another, where are many of those who fell at Festhubert, some of our Indian soldiers have built, for their comrades, brick tombs of extraordinary massiveness. At Villers-aux-Bois the French buried 2,500 of those who were killed in winning the Vimy Ridge. On each grave, at the foot of its wooden cross, there is still stuck in the earth, neck downwards, the bottle in which the first hasty record of the interment was placed. A tiny chapel at one end shelters the Christ brought from the ruined Calvary of Carency, and a little coloured image of the Virgin riddled with German bullet-holes. In all the cemeteries the Graves Registration Units keep the graves, British and French, in repair; they sow grass and plant flowers and shrubs, under the advice of the Headquarters of British gardening at Kew. A few of these places are already gay with

autumn flowers in full bloom. More will be brightened in this way next year, when all the arrears of tidying and restoration that the units found waiting for them have been overtaken.

Outside the cemeteries themselves an immense amount of work is done. The staffs of the units are constantly searching all possible and almost impossible places for isolated graves that may have escaped registration. The Directorate answers every enquiry* sent by a soldier's friends, and will, if they wish, take a photograph of a grave and send it to them, for nothing, thanks to the funds provided for this purpose by the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross Society and St. John's Ambulance. The Director and his officers co-operate with the French engineers, sanitary authorities and communal councils in making arrangements to take

* *All enquiries should be by letter, addressed to :—*
Director of Graves Registration and Enquiries,
War Office, Winchester House,
St. James's Square,
London, S.W.

advantage of the noble and moving gift made by the French nation on December 29th, 1915, when the law was passed which acquires for ever, in the name of the French Government, the special cemeteries where most of our dead in France are buried.

No money is wasted, and no energy is diverted that might have been spent in fighting; all the officers of the units are men disqualified by age, or other disability, for combatant service; the other ranks are filled with men permanently relegated, through age, wounds, or sickness, to duty behind the front. But much of the work is done under fire. One officer, Captain J. D. Macdonald, has already been killed on duty, and two others and several men wounded.

In all wars it has been one of the fears haunting a soldier's friends that his body may be utterly lost. Even in this war there have been such irretrievable losses. But in no great war has so much been done as in this, to prevent the addition of that special torment to the pains of anxiety and of bereavement.